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# Powwow in the Classroom

By Nancy H. Barry and Paula Conlon

About thirty years ago, educational philosophy and practice in the United States began moving away from the “melting pot” notion (the idea that different cultures and ethnic groups within the United States would gradually blend together) toward “multiculturalism” (the idea that the many different subgroups or minorities within this country and the world must be acknowledged and granted status equivalent to that of the dominant culture).

The Education Amendments Act of 1972 (PL 92-318) made multicultural education a legal requirement.<sup>1</sup> While multicultural education was certainly not a new idea for music educators, this legislation spurred increased interest in inclusion of diverse music in the curriculum. The mandate was clear:

To afford to students opportunities to learn about the nature of their own cultural heritage, and to study the contributions of the cultural heritages of the other ethnic groups of the Nation. (Title IX, PL 92-318)<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, music educators have achieved some great strides in providing their students meaningful experiences with diverse

*With a little advance  
preparation,  
music educators  
can teach  
American Indian  
music from  
a culturally  
appropriate  
perspective.*



Photo courtesy of the authors.

Social dances such as those performed at powwows are an ideal way to introduce Native American music to students.

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## Guidelines for Teaching Native American Music

*Don't propagate the Hollywood Indian stereotype. No tribe that we know of has a drumbeat with a strong, weak, weak, weak accent. Not all Native American groups lived in teepees, nor did they all wear fringed buckskin and eagle-feather war bonnets.*

*Don't be ethnocentric. Vocal sounds that do not have dictionary definitions are not nonsense syllables. They do have meaning. Similarly, the high sound of Northern Plains style powwow music sung by the men should not be called a falsetto. Many Native singers object to this term. Rather, Native singers refer to the use of a "high voice" in reference to Northern-style singing.<sup>a</sup>*

*Don't use sacred or ceremonial music out of context. If you are unsure of the context, find another example. However, the solution is not to use the melody from a folk song from another culture or a contrived melody to sing about Native Americans. There is currently an abundance of genuine Native American melodies to choose from. (See the Suggested Resources for Teaching Native American Music sidebar.)*

*Do use the term "Native American" to designate the tribes living in the United States. Be aware of the extensive diversity of Native American tribes. There are over five hundred tribes in the United States, each with its own distinctive heritage. Not all tribes participate in powwows, although the powwow is now widespread across North America. Research individual tribal traditions, and encourage your students to look into their own heritage.*

*Do use the Internet for information. Although Internet articles are not always refereed like scholastic journals or books, many Native American tribes and artists have developed extensive Web sites that are a wealth of good information. The Suggested Resources sidebar also lists Web sites.*

*Do bring in Native American artists to speak about their work as your budget permits. Government agencies promote these programs and are often willing to provide cofunding.*

*Do use Native American music in your classroom. Songs and dances performed at powwows are generally safe territory. Basically, if songs and dances are performed where the public is welcome, they are usually appropriate for classroom use.*

<sup>a</sup>Tara Browner notes that "the desired vocal quality of a Northern singer is high and tight ... When they sing high, Northern singers use their chest voices rather than their throat voices in a male falsetto," *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Pow-wow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 75.

ers teach Native American powwow dances and songs from a culturally appropriate perspective. (See the Guidelines for Teaching Native American Music sidebar.)

### Powwow

Powwows are an excellent source of appropriate Native American song and dance for the classroom. The term "powwow" derives from the Algonquian Indian word "pau wau," meaning a gathering of medicine men and spiritual leaders in a curing ceremony. While the origins of the word reveal personal and sacred traditions, the contemporary Native American powwow is primarily a social time. Powwows are celebrations that involve feasting, arts and crafts, singing, and dancing. Most powwows are open to the public.<sup>4</sup>

Native American music is divided into two categories, the ceremonial and the social. Ceremonial music occurs at a specific time for specific reasons with specific dancers and singers and should not be confused with music performed at a powwow. However, when traditional ceremonies were suppressed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many tribes turned to the emerging intertribal powwow to express their Native American heritage through song and dance. The term "intertribal" is used to designate occasions where more than one tribe is participating, unlike ceremonial music that is usually specific to one tribe. Social dances such as powwows are times for relaxing, getting together with relatives and friends from other tribes and nations, and enjoying intertribal songs and dances. Intertribal dances with their respective songs are good choices for introducing Native American song and dance into the classroom.<sup>5</sup>

With its striking combination of song, drumming, and dance, the Native American powwow offers an excellent resource for the music class. Powwow singing styles are differentiated as being "Northern," originating in the central and northern Great Plains, Canada, and the Great Lakes regions and characterized by a high pitch and hard drum beat, or "Southern," synonymous with Oklahoma and characterized by a lower

musics. However, thirty years after PL 92-318, it is remarkable that the indigenous music of America, Native American music, is still underrepresented in the school music curriculum.

Music teachers may feel confused and uncertain about planning lessons to present Native American music. On one hand, a well-meaning but misinformed teacher may unwittingly reinforce cultural stereotypes, such as by including the song "Ten Little Indians" in lessons about Native Americans.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, fear of offending may prompt teachers and administrators to avoid using Native American music altogether.

Music teachers must feel empowered to use Native American music in their classrooms! This empowerment can only be achieved by equipping music teachers with clear teaching guidelines and dependable sources for obtaining teaching materials. While not comprehensive, this article provides suggestions to help music teach-

pitch and less strident drum beat. A typical drum group consists of ten to twelve male singer-drummers seated or standing around a large drum, with female singers, seated behind the men, joining in partway through the song. Series of hard drumbeats, called “honor beats,” honor the drum and cue the dancers.

A typical intertribal powwow song is made up of the following parts:

- Lead (head singer begins the first line of the song)
- Second (the rest of the male singer-drummers join in the song)
- First chorus (the “A” section of the song)
- Honor beats (in Southern style this consists of three strong drum beats)
- Second chorus (the “B” section of the song)
- Repetition of the entire song (often four times through)
- Tail (“coda” or final section, a repetition of the second chorus)
- Final drumbeats (Southern-style songs often use five strong drumbeats to end the song)

Many contemporary powwow songs are made up of a combination of translatable text and vocables, which can be defined as syllables without dictionary definitions. Vocables should not be referred to as “nonsense syllables” or as arbitrary, improvisational sounds. They may be derived from language sounds that have an abstract definition, portions of words that may exist or are extinct, or any combination of the above. Vocables are related to the language sounds of the culture and are therefore characteristic of specific music types. An example of a series of vocables used in powwow songs is “he ya, he ya, he ya.” “One-Eyed Ford” is an example of a powwow song that contains vocables.

The powwow typically begins with the Grand Entry, a colorful parade in which dancers enter the arena, beginning with flag bearers and followed by head dancers, tribal leaders, men, women, and then children, while the drum group sings an intertribal dance song. Most powwow dances move in a circle in a clockwise direction. Consider staging a “Grand Entry” in your music classroom to begin a unit on Native American music, following

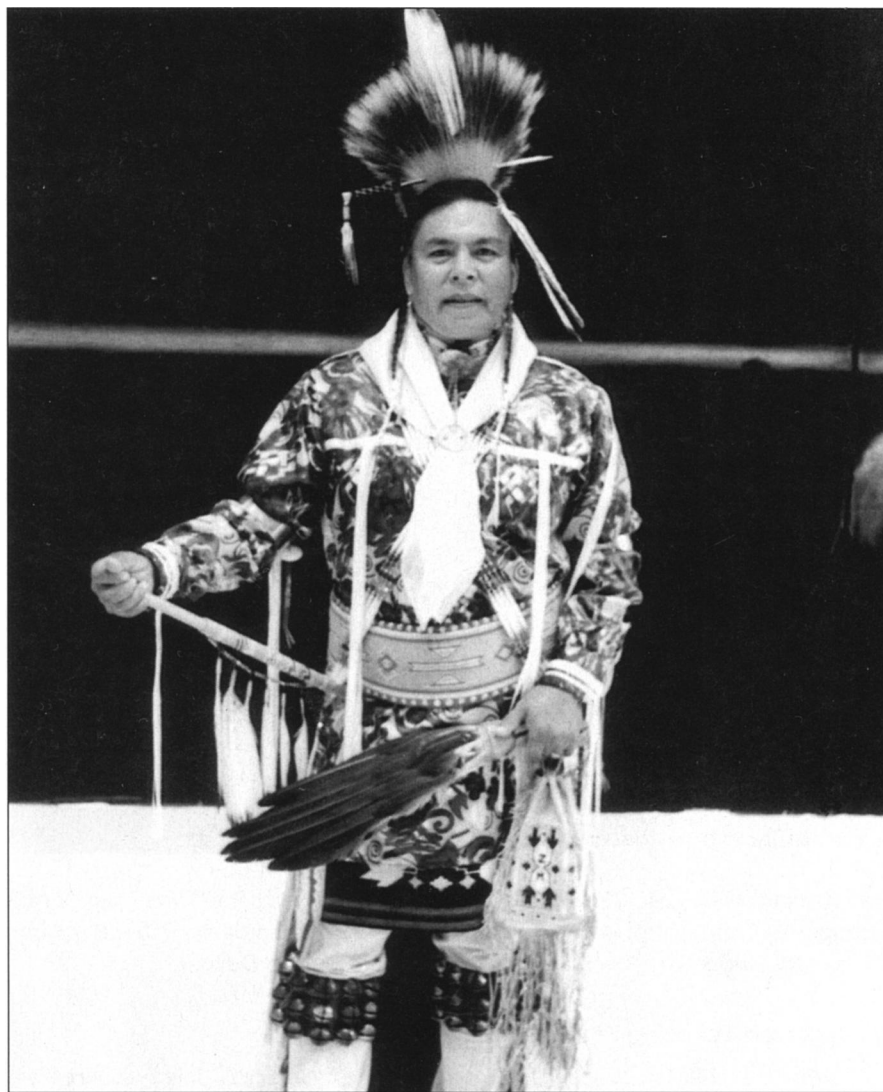


Photo courtesy of the authors.

“Fancy Dancing” calls for a flashy style of dance and apparel.

the guidelines below. There are many possible ways to accomplish this, depending upon your classroom situation and the space available. One way to stage a Grand Entry would be to line students up in the hallway outside the classroom. As students in the drum circle in the classroom play, have the dancers “parade in” to the music classroom using the basic dance step. (Dance steps are described later in this article.)

### Powwow/Social Dance Songs

Song and dance are integral components of the Native American powwow. Since Native American songs are traditionally passed down from generation to generation through the oral tradition, the most authentic way to teach Native American song is by rote.

“One-Eyed Ford,” a popular intertribal round dance song, is a good example of how songs have changed as they have passed from generation to generation. Its humorous lyrics tell of a young man offering his sweetheart a ride home from the dance in his “one-eyed Ford” (a vehicle with only one working headlight—common on reservations where vehicle inspection laws and licensing are not enforced). These lyrics have gradually changed over the years, with earlier versions referring to “my best pony,” “manufactured wagon,” and eventually, “model-T Ford.”<sup>6</sup> A “manufactured wagon” was a “store-bought” wagon. As reflected by changes in the lyrics over time, the wagon was eventually replaced by the automobile. (See Lesson Plans for “One-Eyed Ford.”)

## Lesson Plans for “One-Eyed Ford”

According to Kevin Connywerdy of the Comanche tribe, who is a Fancy Dancer with the Oklahoma Fancy Dancers, “One-Eyed Ford” is currently sung at powwows as a round dance without English words and as a Forty-Nine song (an informal singing around the drum after a powwow) with English words. The first of three lessons based on “One-Eyed Ford” is presented here, and the other two can be found at [www.menc.org](http://www.menc.org) as “Bonus Content” for this month’s issue of *MEJ*.

### “One-Eyed Ford”: Lesson I

*Grade Levels:* middle elementary

*Target Music Concepts:* melody, beat, triple meter

*Content Standards:* 1, 6, 9

### Objectives

- Students will be able to sing “One-Eyed Ford” with increasing melodic accuracy.
- Students will be able to sing “One-Eyed Ford” with increasing rhythmic accuracy.
- Students will be able to keep a steady long-short beat pattern by patting their laps.
- Students will be able to explain the story of “One-Eyed Ford.”

**Vocabulary:** powwow, melody, beat, triple meter, transportation.

**Materials Needed:** “One-Eyed Ford” CD; CD player. (The “One-Eyed Ford” song [voice and drum] is on the CD included with Bryan Burton’s book *Moving within the Circle: Contemporary Native American Music and Dance*.)

### Suggested Teaching Procedures

1. Ask the children to listen to you sing “One-Eyed Ford.” Invite children to speculate about what the song is about.
2. Explain that “One-Eyed Ford” is actually a very old song. The words have changed over the years to describe different kinds of transportation that were available at the time, such as model-T Fords, a manufactured wagon, or, in earlier versions, a favorite pony.
3. Tell the students that “One-Eyed Ford” is often sung at powwows, which are social gatherings when Native Americans come together to enjoy singing, dancing, and fun. Since this song is intended to accompany dancing, the beat is a very important aspect. Invite the children to pat the long-short beat in triple meter on their laps while you sing “One-Eyed Ford” again.
4. Invite the children to sing the words and melody of “One-Eyed Ford” with you.
5. Conclude the lesson by asking children to tell the story of the “One-Eyed Ford” and the way that the song has changed over time.

### Suggested Questions for Evaluation

- What is the song “One-Eyed Ford” about?
- How have the words to “One-Eyed Ford” changed over many years? Why?

### Connections and Follow-ups

- Find library books and Web sites to learn more about the tradition of Native American powwows.
- Listen to other examples of songs about transportation from a variety of cultures.

Authentic powwow songs can be found in a number of sources, but one of the most complete and readily available sources of Native American powwow songs for music teachers is Bryan Burton’s *Moving within the Circle: Contemporary Native American Music and Dance*. (See the Suggested Resources for Teaching Native American Music sidebar.)

### Basic Powwow Dance Steps

*Men’s and boys’ dance steps and apparel.* The basic step for men and boys has two parts. The drumbeat has a “strong, weak” accent (i.e., duple meter); this drumbeat is used for intertribal social dances, Grand Entry, and some contest songs. The dancer steps down on the ball of the foot on the downbeat, then lifts the foot slightly and places the foot flat on the ground on the upbeat. This ball/flat-foot step continues on alternating feet.

The men’s basic step is used in traditional contest dances, as well as social intertribal dance songs. Contest dances evolved from traditional dances of various tribes and are a common feature at contemporary powwows with cash prizes ranging from \$100 to over \$1,000. Dancers are divided into categories according to their style of dance and its associated style of dress (such as the jingle dance dress for women or the elaborate clothing worn by male fancy dancers). Dancers are judged on the aesthetic quality of their outfits as well as their dancing expertise.

The men’s Southern Straight dance is referred to as a gentleman’s dance, with the men slightly crouched over to symbolize looking for prey. The regalia or outfit (not referred to as a costume) traditionally featured an otter tail hanging down the back of the dancer. Contemporary outfits sometimes replace the otter tail with a long, narrow piece of cloth decorated with ribbonwork. Northern traditional dancers wear large feather bustles on their backs instead of otter tails, but they do the same basic step as their Southern Plains counterparts. Another men’s contest powwow style is the Grass Dance, which originated in the Northern Plains. The Grass Dance outfit features long strips of yarn hung from the shoulders and waist to symbolize prairie grass, and dance steps

portray the smoothing and flattening of the grass in preparation for a victory dance for returning warriors. Dancers move their shoulders gracefully back and forth to symbolize the long grass swaying in the wind.

The men's contest Fancy Dance is a contemporary outgrowth of the Wild West Shows, which encouraged a fancier, flashier style of dance. Although the basic step is still apparent, the Fancy Dance incorporates a wide variety of creative movements, such as leaping up and down, often ending with the splits to attract the eye of the judges. Fancy Dance regalia features two bustles worn on the back of the dancer, with colorful streamers replacing the original horse hairs that hung from the bustles. Fancy Dancers are expected to dance to both Northern- and Southern-style powwow songs, displaying their creativity and flexibility in dance steps.

*Women's and girls' dance steps and apparel.* The basic step for women and girls is a modified version of the men's basic step, with the same "strong, weak" drum accent. The women's step is executed by placing the foot flat on the ground on the downbeat with a bent leg, followed by straightening the leg on the upbeat. This step continues on alternating feet, while keeping the upper body erect and the head level.

Women's traditional contest dance styles that focus on the basic step are the Southern Cloth Dance (originating in the Southern Plains area) and the Buckskin Dress Dance (both Northern and Southern Plains styles). Both styles feature long dresses with a fringed shawl worn over the dancer's arm. Beadwork patterns characterizing the women's tribal affiliation adorn the outfits. Dancers move with dignity and grace, the fringes on their shawls and the buckskin dresses swaying back and forth in time to the drum and the dancers' demeanor displaying great pride in their heritage.

As with the men's contest styles, new styles for women emerged in the twentieth century. Originating around the 1920s among the Chippewa tribe of the Great Lakes area, the Jingle Dress has hundreds of small cones, traditionally made from twisted snuff can lids, which are sewn onto a knee-length cloth dress that allows free-

## Suggested Resources for Teaching Native American Music

### Books

Browner, Tara. *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Powwow*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. Excellent cultural background and description of powwows; contains numerous interviews with powwow participants. No scores or lesson plans.

Burton, Bryan. *Moving within the Circle: Contemporary Native American Music and Dance* [book and CD]. Danbury, CT: World Music Press, 1993. Includes scores of songs with vocal sounds underneath (including intertribal and Round Dance songs), along with descriptions of cultural context. Of particular note are powwow songs, including "Intertribal Dance," "Pueblo Two-Step," "Rabbit Dance," "One-Eyed Ford," and "Picture Song."

Heth, Charlotte, ed. *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions*. Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 1993. Excellent resource for cultural information; no scores or lesson plans.

Roberts, Chris. *Powwow Country: People of the Circle*. Missoula, MT: Meadowlark Publishing Company, 1998. Informative small book about history of powwow and information about contemporary events. Lots of pictures and quotes, no scores, and not a great deal of information specifically about music.

Spotted Eagle, Douglas. *Voices of Native America: Instruments and Music*. Liberty, UT: Eagle's View Publishing, 1997. Excellent supplementary resource but does not contain many songs. Excellent information on instruments and detailed directions for construction.

White, Julia. *The Powwow Trail: Understanding and Enjoying the Native American Powwow*. Summertown, TN: Book Publishing Company, 1996. Excellent, easy-to-read information about powwow protocol and various dances. No scores or lesson plans.

### Web sites

[www.nativeculture.com](http://www.nativeculture.com)

[www.powwows.com](http://www.powwows.com)

[www.powersource.com/gallery/powwow](http://www.powersource.com/gallery/powwow)

<http://members.tripod.com/~JingleDancer>

### Videos

Videos listed below are available from Full Circle Videos, [www.fullcir.com](http://www.fullcir.com).

*How to Dance Native American Style: Beginning Steps*. Excellent introduction to powwow singing and dancing, viewers can sing/dance along with video, step-by-step instructions.

*Into the Circle: An Introduction to Native American Powwows*. Includes information on cultural background of powwows, songs and singers, format of powwow songs, and short clips on various powwow dances.

*Native American Men's and Women's Dance Styles: Volumes 1 & 2*. Information on powwow dancing, lots of detail on specific dances.

A list of additional powwow videos available from various distributors can be found at [www.powwows.com](http://www.powwows.com).

*Continued on page 26*



dom of movement. The cones create a pleasing, gentle sound as they bounce against each other when the dancer moves her feet back and forth in an energetic shuffle in time to the drum.

The women's Fancy Shawl Dance emerged around the 1950s in the Northern Plains area as the counterpart to the men's Fancy Dance. The Fancy Shawl outfit consists of a knee-length cloth dress, beaded leggings and moccasins, and a shawl draped over the shoulders. The Fancy Shawl dancer bounces and spins on her toes, portraying the flight of the butterfly.

In contrast to the men's and women's contest dances described above, the Round Dance is a social dance that utilizes a relatively simple step accessible to all. Dancers face inward in a circle and move sideways in a clockwise direction. The drumbeat has a distinctive long-short-short pattern in triple meter; this drumbeat is also used for a variety of other specialty dances. In the Round Dance, dancers step sideways onto the left foot on the quarter note ("long"), then bring the right foot over on the eighth note ("short"). Often men and women form separate circles or partial circles, with the women dancing in a slower tempo, moving only on the quarter note. The Round Dance is an excellent starting point for introducing powwow song and dance into the classroom. At an actual powwow, the public would be invited to join in for this social dance, and it is not used for competition or exhibition dances. Exhibition dances often feature individual dance styles used in contest dances, but the dancers are not competing at this time.

## Conclusion

This article is intended to help you become comfortable with using Native American material in the music classroom. If you approach these songs and dances with respect and do your homework, your students will have the opportunity to learn about a culture that is very much a part of their heritage as Americans, whether or not they

## CDs

The following recommendations are a sampling of the many fine recordings available:

Black Lodge Singers, *Kids' Powwow Songs*, e.g. "Mighty Mouse" Song. Canyon Records CR-6274.

The Tootsoosis Family, *Drums of Poundmaker B Cree Powwow Songs*, Northern Plains-style singing with higher pitch, includes Round Dance songs. Canyon Records CR-6157.

Yellowhammer, *Yellowhammer B Live at Hollywood, Florida*. Southern Plains-style singing with lower pitch, includes intertribal songs suitable for Grand Entry. Indian House Records IH-2016.

More recordings can be found at Canyon Records ([www.canyonrecords.com](http://www.canyonrecords.com)); Indian House Records ([www.indianhouse.com](http://www.indianhouse.com)); Silverwave Records ([www.silverwave.com](http://www.silverwave.com)); Sound of America Record Distributors ([www.soundofamerica.com/](http://www.soundofamerica.com/)); and Sweet Grass Records ([www.sweetgrassrecords.com](http://www.sweetgrassrecords.com)).

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## MENC Resources

The following MENC resources may be helpful to music educators who would like to know more about American Indian music. Visit the MENC Web site ([www.menc.org](http://www.menc.org)) or call 800-828-0229 to order.

Web page for Native American Indian and Alaskan Heritage Month; includes teaching guides (<http://menc.org/guides/nahm/NAHMfront.html>).

### Books

*Making Connections: Multicultural Music and the National Standards*, edited by William M. Anderson and Marvelene C. Moore. 1997. Item #1510; *Making Connections Companion Recording (CD)* #3000; set #3020.

*World Musics and Music Education: Facing the Issues*, edited by Bennett Reimer. 2002. #1512.

*Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education* (2nd ed.), edited by William M. Anderson and Patricia Shehan Campbell. 1996. Item #1509. CD, item #3017; book and CD set. #3027.

### Video

*Teaching the Music of American Indians*, by David P. McAllester and Edwin Schupman. 1991. #3072 (clearance priced).

themselves have Native American roots.

## Notes

1. Michael L. Mark, *Contemporary Music Education*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996).

2. Ibid., 189.

3. This activity is recommended in an "Indian" lesson plan currently posted on a Web site for teachers.

4. Dennis Zotigh, member of the Kiowa/San Juan Pueblo and Santee Dakota tribes and director of The Great American

Indian Dancers, a professional dance group based in the Oklahoma City area. Personal interview with Paula Conlon, 25 June 2002.

5. Steve Littleman, member of the Kiowa/Cheyenne tribes and director of the Oklahoma Fancy Dancers, a professional powwow dance group based in the Oklahoma City area. Personal interview with Paula Conlon, 13 May 2002.

6. Bryan Burton, *Moving within the Circle: Contemporary Native American Music and Dance* (Danbury, CT: World Music Press, 1993), 85. ■